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UNCONTROLLABLE MECHANISMS: MAURICE BLANCHOT'S INORGANIC WRITING

Abstract

This article interrogates a thinking of writing as *techné* that runs decisively through Blanchot's thought but is yet to be examined in any systematic manner to date. It is well known that Blanchot was an attentive reader of Heidegger, although some have overstated or simplified the influence of the latter on the French writer; his engagement with Heidegger was close and detailed but also tense and adversarial. This article highlights important differences between Blanchot and Heidegger on the relationship between art and technology. It draws attention to mechanical references in fictional and critical work by Blanchot first published between 1949 and 1980, from a telephone call in *La Folie du jour* to the impact of mass paperback publishing discussed in 'Les Grands Réducteurs' and the careful punctuation of 'Nietzsche et l'écriture fragmentaire'. The final section examines selected fragments from *Le Pas au-delà* and *L'Écriture du désastre* and considers how the opposition between nature and culture is complicated by an inorganic fragmentary writing which proliferates like a cancerous cell, with consequences for the human subject.

Résumé

Cet article examine une réflexion sur l'écriture comme *technè* qui se retrouve dans l'œuvre de Maurice Blanchot mais qui n'a jamais fait l'objet d'une étude systématique. On sait que Blanchot était un lecteur attentif de Heidegger, mais l'influence de ce dernier sur l'écrivain français a été surestimée ou simplifiée par certains; son dialogue avec Heidegger était incisif et approfondi, mais aussi tendu et conflictuel. Cet article cerne les différences importantes entre Blanchot et Heidegger en ce qui concerne la relation entre art et technique. L'article

s'appuie sur des références mécaniques présentes dans un récit et des essais publiés entre 1949 et 1980: un appel téléphonique dans *La Folie du jour*, l'impact de la littérature de poche dans 'Les Grands Réducteurs' et la ponctuation délibérée de 'Nietzsche et l'écriture fragmentaire'. La dernière section examine des fragments choisis du *Pas au-delà* et de *L'Écriture du désastre* afin d'établir comment cette écriture fragmentaire et inorganique, qui prolifère comme une cellule cancéreuse, complique l'opposition entre nature et culture, et ses conséquences pour le sujet humain.

The question of the opposition or borderline between nature and culture has long held sway over philosophy; in modern times the figure of Martin Heidegger looms large over this debate and the impact of Heidegger's thinking on post-war French literature and philosophy is well known. In 1953, the year that Heidegger delivered the lecture 'The Question Concerning Technology', Maurice Blanchot claimed that writing was one technique among others.¹ In this year *La Nouvelle Revue française* was relaunched as *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française* and Blanchot was able, as regular contributor, to confidently set out his own critical stall and, while still being a topical book reviewer, reach beyond the immediate present to broaden the scope of his essays. Two further essays published that year consider the relationship between art and technology. In the first of these Blanchot acknowledges the emancipatory and transformative potential of modern technology, arguing that art does not negate this potential but it does express and perhaps accomplish relationships that precede all

¹ Maurice Blanchot, 'La Bête de Lascaux', *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française*, 4 (April 1953), 684–93 (p. 684). Heidegger gave the lecture in Munich on 18 November 1953.

objective and technological accomplishment.² He makes a similar point in the second essay where he writes that before the inventions of technology, the use of radio waves and the transmission of images, we could hear changes that seem unremarkable today in the affirmations of Hölderlin and Mallarmé.³ Art and modern technology display similar characteristics, Blanchot writes of an anonymous humming associated with both, but there are also important differences: art is not subordinate to a functional teleology and literature in particular is described as an originary experience that precedes all objective and technological accomplishment. There is a distinction in Blanchot between techniques of liberation and transformation and *techne* which precedes but does not exclude or oppose technology as progress. In this article I will trace the development of Blanchot's thought to demonstrate how a thinking of *techne* informs his own literary and theoretical practice up to and including the fragmentary writing of his later texts.

Much of Blanchot's engagement with Heidegger turns on the relationship between art and technology and there is evidence that he was influential for Bernard Stiegler. In the 1960s Blanchot published four essays with an explicit focus on modern technology; this is the extent of his direct engagement with modern technology but the timing of these essays demonstrates that it is essential to view everything that Blanchot writes within a very specific intellectual and historical context: two on the atomic bomb appeared shortly after the first nuclear weapons test by the French on 13 February 1960 in Reggane, a district in Algeria, and after these weapons became available for use in January 1964; one on the experience of

² Maurice Blanchot, 'La Disparition de la littérature' [1953], in *Le Livre à venir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), pp. 265–74 (p. 268), Blanchot's emphasis.

³ Blanchot, 'La Recherche du point zéro' [1953], in *Le Livre à venir*, pp. 275–85 (pp. 275–76).

Yuri Gagarin responded to a recent essay by Levinas; and one on the impact of mass paperback publishing followed an article published a few months earlier by Hubert Damisch.⁴ A discussion of technology is rarely front and centre in Blanchot but this does not make these margins any less significant: details may seem haphazard, contingent or realistic but, punctuating the unity of the whole, they are an important symptom of the inorganic which this article seeks to foreground.

Leslie Hill has shown that Blanchot resisted the Romantic or Modernist temptation ‘to subordinate fragmentary writing to a conception of the unified artwork and the dialectic of realisation or unrealisation it implied.’ If what is at stake in the fragmentary is, as Hill writes, the affirmation of ‘an always other promise of futurity’ on which we should draw ‘as the world threatens to move into a new and perhaps final epoch’ dominated amongst other things by technological uniformity, then the reader is challenged to hear in fragmentary writing what we might call technical pluralities or something other than dominion in technology.⁵ Ian James has explored how the philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy unfolds as ‘a decision to respond to the demand imposed by the multiple and the fragmentary’; one of the ways this is felt is in

⁴ Maurice Blanchot, ‘Sur un changement d’époque: l’exigence du retour’ [1960], in *L’Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), pp. 394–418; ‘L’Apocalypse déçoit’ [1964], in *L’Amitié* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), pp. 118–27; ‘La Conquête de l’espace’ [1964], in *Écrits politiques: 1953-1998*, ed. by Éric Hoppénot (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), pp. 125–28; ‘Les Grands Réducteurs’ [1965], in *L’Amitié*, pp. 74–86.

⁵ Leslie Hill, *Maurice Blanchot and Fragmentary Writing: A Change of Epoch* (London: Continuum, 2012), p. 7.

Nancy's thinking of the intersection of the human subject and body with technology.⁶ What are the consequences for the human subject in Blanchot's fragmentary writing?

Art and technology

There are two versions of *techne* at stake for Heidegger: *techne* as art and foundation [*Dichtung*], revealing while sheltering the mysterious; and *techne* as modern technology and threat [*Technik*], commanding all into unconcealment and uprooting the human from earth. Modern technology is a form of art corrupted; it is the result of the unbridled objectivity of metaphysics which reduces the whole of nature to a stockpile of resources. The atomic bomb is not dangerous as a deadly machine with the capacity to kill thousands but as a manifestation of the totalizing will which demands that everything is transformed into raw material to be exploited. For Heidegger the poetry of Hölderlin is significant because it preserves the otherness of Being (our ontological condition that includes a recognition of our own finitude) by holding something back that resists the totalization of metaphysical representation. This objectification peaks in the technological dominion of modernity, when the event of Hölderlin's 'saying' offers the opportunity for a new beginning.⁷ The possibility

⁶ Ian James, *The Fragmentary Demand: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

⁷ For his reading of Hölderlin, see Martin Heidegger, *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, trans. by Keith Hoeller (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2000). For one of his earliest explicit denunciation of the deleterious effects of modern technology, see Martin Heidegger, 'Why Poets?', in *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and trans. by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 200–41. Also see Martin Heidegger,

of dying and the possibility of language frame and condition human existence for Heidegger and ensure that we, and not animals who do not ‘die’ in the true sense of the word, are the beings who may understand Being.

Blanchot acknowledges Heidegger’s reading of Hölderlin in a parenthetical reference in one of the essays from 1953 quoted above but denies that ontology can explain the poetic experience.⁸ Heidegger relies on language not becoming an object for itself. In Blanchot it is the ability of language to refer to itself that makes literature possible while simultaneously unworking this possibility, revealing its condition of possibility to be the absence of any world and impossibility of any foundation. The essence of literature is to elude all essential determination: the endless self-questioning disclosed in Hölderlin means that all that remains of literature is the trace of its own disappearance, a question erring around an absent centre. This is to say that literature is founded on a ruinous impossibility that cannot be overcome, what Blanchot later refers to, in a reversal of Heidegger’s formulation that is not a simple negation of his thought, as death as the impossibility of all possibility.⁹

Heidegger’s existential analysis requires limits: Derrida writes that a hierarchical order between *Dasein* and other entities is structured by impassable edges, most notably the

‘The Question Concerning Technology’, trans. by William Lovitt, in *Basic Writings*, ed. by David Farrell Krell, rev. edn (London: Routledge, 1993) pp. 311–41.

⁸ Blanchot, ‘La Disparition de la littérature’, p. 269.

⁹ Maurice Blanchot, *L’Écriture du désastre* (Paris : Gallimard, 1980), pp. 114–15. For the original turn of phrase, see Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, [1962] 1988) pp. 306–07. The differences between Heidegger and Blanchot on the question of death and dying have significant political implications that are beyond the scope of this article.

limit separating the dropping-dead of animals from the properly-dying of *Dasein*.¹⁰ In Blanchot the experience of death is a relentless turning around the threshold which undoes that very threshold and so challenges the hierarchy between human and animal (this explains the interruptive inhuman figures such as the stag beetle and vibrant stones that feature later in this article). An anonymous inhuman humming is the only possible-impossible experience of dying in Blanchot, for whom Hölderlin is more clearly a contemporary of Beckett's: 'c'est cette parole neutre, ce qui a toujours été dit, ne peut cesser de se dire et ne peut être entendu, tourment dont les pages de Samuel Beckett rapprochent de nous le pressentiment.'¹¹ The voice tirelessly repeating words does not indicate a grey, undifferentiated, and pure writing but an infinitely contested and vibrant neutrality that cannot be set in stone or restricted to a traditional notion of 'literature'.¹² Blanchot writes that the asubjective, disembodied, disobedient, even dehumanized aspects of writing exemplified by Beckett's *L'Innommable* are also exhibited by radio and screen. Art is both part of, and more radical than, the technological in the usual sense.

Bernard Stiegler recognizes in Blanchot a thinker of writing as *techne* and takes up many of the key emphases of his thought; references to Blanchot in *La Technique et le temps*

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Apories: mourir — s'attendre aux 'limites de la vérité'* (Paris: Galilée, 1996).

¹¹ Blanchot, 'La Recherche du point zéro', p. 285.

¹² Blanchot is here reviewing Barthes for whom the degree zero of writing is blank, absent, and neutral. See Roland Barthes, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Éric Marty, new edn, 5 vols (Paris: Seuil, 2002), I, 173. On the differences between Blanchot and Barthes on the topic of the *neutre* or neutrality, see Christophe Bident, 'R/M, 1953', in *Blanchot's Epoch*, ed. by Leslie Hill and Michael Holland (= special issue of *Paragraph*, 30 (2007)) pp. 67–83.

are not uncommon.¹³ However, Stiegler adopts the Heideggerian claim that there are different epochs of Being that can be identified and addressed as such, arguing that historical epochs and the collective forms of time-consciousness which define them are constituted in and through technical systems and prostheses. He cites Blanchot's claim that writing is one technique among others to support his argument that the impersonality that defines our time-consciousness in the age of Real Time media also inheres in writing as technics.¹⁴ Stiegler undoubtedly misreads Blanchot and this is not because writing only problematically stands for technics in Blanchot.¹⁵ The key point is that the exteriorization (or what Stiegler, borrowing terminology from Blanchot, calls the 'conversion'¹⁶) of the self into the technical artefact is never accomplished. In Blanchot writing without horizon traces but thereby exceeds the horizon, because one has to be outside of that horizon in order to (re)inscribe it. Something always escapes the limits of memory in the form of that very forgetting which is a condition of possibility of memory, which cannot itself be remembered as such because it precedes memory: '❖ Tu ne trouveras pas les limites de l'oubli, si loin que tu puisses oublier.'¹⁷

¹³ Bernard Stiegler, *La Technique et le temps: 1. La Faute d'Épiméthée, 2. Désorientation, 3. Le Temps du cinéma et la question du mal-être* (Paris: Galilée, 1994–2001; Paris: Fayard, 2018), pp. 17, 21, 36, 116–17, 136, 140 n. 2, 232 n. 3, 251, 267, 286, 297–300, 347–49, 456, 715.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 347.

¹⁵ See Calum Watt, 'The Uses of Maurice Blanchot in Bernard Stiegler's *Technics and Time*', *Paragraph*, 39 (2016), 305–18.

¹⁶ Stiegler, *La Technique et le temps*, p. 300.

¹⁷ Maurice Blanchot, *L'Attente L'Oubli* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), p. 68.

Blanchot moves beyond the historicizing of literature and technology and as a result the opposition between modern technology and *techne* that was so important to Heidegger gives way to a very different experience of writing: the mechanical. Addressing the question posed by Hölderlin and taken up by Heidegger — ‘why poets in a desolate time?’¹⁸ — in the closing pages of *L’Espace littéraire*, Blanchot writes that the desolate time is neither time nor timelessness but a fracturing expressed by writing as forgetting, an outwardly self-reflexive writing that contests itself and is contested to the point that it is effaced. The demand of the fragmentary is here felt because the limits imposed by Heidegger cannot be maintained: ‘celui qui est à l’œuvre quand “on meurt” et qui, perpétuant l’être sous l’espèce du néant, fait de la lumière une fascination, de l’objet l’image et de nous le cœur vide du ressassement éternel.’¹⁹ The fragile and vulnerable subject become empty heart open to the outside is given over to the endlessly recapitulative movement that is the condition of possibility not only of language but also of literature, what Derrida will later call iterability. The aporia of forgetting, which is another expression for the impossibility of dying, allows artificial mechanical memory to contaminate the organic. Having shown that the question of literature or writing is for Blanchot a question of *techne*, but one related to the impossibility of dying rather than to fundamental ontology, this article will explore some of Blanchot’s decisive mechanical references.

An inhuman interruption

¹⁸ ‘[W]ozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?’ Hölderlin quoted in Heidegger, ‘Why Poets?’, p. 202.

¹⁹ Maurice Blanchot, ‘La Littérature et l’expérience originelle’ [1952], in *L’Espace littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), pp. 277–333 (p. 331).

Blanchot does not share Heidegger's view of technology: in his work the technical is associated not with instrumental reason but with an interruption which ensures that something excessive always escapes the system. In *La Folie du jour* [1973], originally published in 1949 as 'Un récit[?]', this excess appears as a sort of inhuman resistance and is triggered by a telephone call. Largely set in an asylum, the narrative is centred on the moment someone crushes glass into the narrator's eyes. Now blinded by light, he cannot return the unremitting studious gaze of the ophthalmologist and psychiatrist to whom, we learn at the end of the text, this narrative has been recounted. But behind these figures of authority embodying the laws of this panoptic society lurks the silhouette of another Law; far from feeling intimidated, the narrator tells us that he seemed to scare this other Law.²⁰ Hill has written that this is the text's transgressive moment, revealing the double bind and fragility of the Law that is always both inescapable and unanswerable.²¹ Madness responds to the demand of this Law in a double movement: daylight is mad because it both enables sight and blinds us when we look at it. Such reversible mobility ensures that madness cannot be confined to the limits of reason. Consequently, when the narrator as 'madman' is imprisoned and studied in an attempt to render him an object of knowledge, a trace evades the scrutiny of the experts as he is reduced in their eyes to a drop of water, an ink stain, until they eventually no longer see him.²² This unknowable trace is a resistance to the Law and is signalled elsewhere in the text by a stag beetle, once the narrator, scuttling around the basement of the library.

²⁰ Maurice Blanchot, *La Folie du jour* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1973; Paris: Gallimard, 2003), p. 24.

²¹ Leslie Hill, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 100–01.

²² Blanchot, *La Folie du jour*, p. 23.

This transformation occurs after the first of two references to a telephone in *La Folie du jour*: one day the narrator found himself imprisoned within the town and unable to travel; at this moment the telephone stopped responding. The second reference to a telephone a few pages later indicates the, otherwise unknown, destination of this call: in the establishment the narrator recounts that he was given the job of responding to the telephone.²³ The telephone call is an interrupted monologue between the two non-identical figures of the narrator: one a ‘madman’ imprisoned within the asylum and working for the system, the other a delinquent roaming the city streets. But this exchange is one-sided, the telephone having refused to respond in the first instance. Christopher Fynsk has written of the closing line of *La Folie du jour* (‘Un récit? Non, pas de récit, plus jamais’) in terms of a refusal that ‘seems to issue from a space and time other than that of the incarceration described in the lines that precede it. It speaks to the law and to the sovereignty of reason, to be sure, but it now draws a line in relation to the latter’s demand.’²⁴ This analysis is perhaps more persuasive when applied to the telephone, which similarly refuses dialogue and therefore an exchange with reason, represented paradoxically by the narrator’s non-identical double within the asylum.²⁵

The telephone establishes and annuls a distance that precedes and enables language. It interrupts oral presence and reveals the intervention of *techné* in what seems most human. Writing of the telephone in Joyce’s *Ulysses* Derrida argues that in the beginning, and before the modern device, there must have been a telephone call: ‘téléphonie mentale qui, inscrivant

²³ Ibid., pp. 15, 20.

²⁴ Christopher Fynsk, *Last Steps: Maurice Blanchot’s Exilic Writing* (New York: Fordham, 2013), pp. 57–75 (p. 66).

²⁵ For a different reading of the telephone, see Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989).

le lointain, la distance, la différence et l'espace dans la *phonè*, à la fois institue, interdit et brouille le soi-disant monologue.²⁶ The origin and the destination of such a call are also the concern of Derrida in an analysis of the apocalyptic tone that has dominated Western philosophy since the time of Kant, where he makes several references to Blanchot and *La Folie du jour* in particular. Noting that apocalypse in the Hebrew Bible says discovery, disclosure, uncovering and unveiling, Derrida observes that any attempt to shed light on the apocalypse leads only to a further, brighter apocalypse that blinds; the apocalypse does not just destroy, it also unveils: 'toute eschatologie apocalyptique se promet au nom [...] d'une lumière plus lumineuse que toutes les lumières qu'elle rend possibles.'²⁷ A deconstruction of such discourse (Derrida names, among others, Heidegger on the history of metaphysics, the essence of science or technology) must fold to [*se plier à*] (in the sense of giving in to and doubling over) the finest diversity of apocalyptic ruses.²⁸ Any discourse on the apocalyptic risks becoming apocalyptic but there is the suggestion that through such a folding, or doubling, it might be possible to derail the apocalyptic tone — to interrupt the unity of the destination, the self-identity of the addressee or sender — and to hear the other tone, or the tone of the other.

In *La Folie du jour* there is no consequence for the narrator who answers the telephone within the asylum, committed as he is to an exchange within the limits of reason; but the narrator wandering the city, for whom the telephone refuses to respond, is exposed to that rupture which triggers an identity crisis: 'il me vit tel que j'étais, un insecte, une bête à

²⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Ulysse gramophone: deux mots pour Joyce* (Paris: Galilée, 1987), p. 82.

²⁷ Jacques Derrida, *D'un ton apocalyptique adopté naguère en philosophie* (Paris: Galilée, 1982), p. 63.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 66.

mandibules venue des régions obscures de la misère.’²⁹ The narrator asks himself who he was in this moment but acknowledges that any response would have thrown him into disarray. Left waiting on the telephone, he refuses in turn to respond to this question. When refusal ceases to be subjective will, it becomes dehumanized in a positive sense. Nine years later, in the context of De Gaulle’s return to power, Blanchot writes of the political dimension of a refusal that is neither disdainful nor enthusiastic but anonymous because accomplished from a very poor beginning that belongs first and foremost to those who cannot speak.³⁰ Refusal is an act of resistance affirmed through something other than power and not by sovereign subjects or in a single name. The telephone in *La Folie du jour* is simultaneously this refusal and what precedes it. In this sense the telephone call is fragmentary because, as Hill has remarked evoking Moses’s broken tablets, it is not dependent on any prior law but is itself that abyssal law of interruption that forcibly interrupts all laws, including itself.³¹

The telephone in *La Folie du jour* indicates that a thinking of technology is implied in the fragmentary idiom developed by Blanchot in the 1960s. There is a vast difference between the non-subjective refusal seen in *La Folie du jour* and ‘Le Refus’ and the subjectivity associated with the version of the fragment put forward by the Jena Romantics in the *Athenaeum*, the influential journal edited by August Wilhelm and Friedrich Schlegel between 1798 and 1800. The latter wrote of the form chosen for some of the contributions to this journal: ‘as yet no genre exists that is fragmentary, both in form and in content,

²⁹ Blanchot, *La Folie du jour*, p. 16.

³⁰ Blanchot, ‘Le Refus’ [1958], in *Écrits politiques*, p. 29.

³¹ Leslie Hill, ‘From Deconstruction to Disaster (Derrida, Blanchot, Hegel)’, in *Resounding ‘Glas’*, ed. by Mairéad Hanrahan, Martin McQuillan, and Simon Morgan Wortham (= special issue of *Paragraph*, 39 (2016)), pp. 187–201 (p. 198).

simultaneously completely subjective and individual, and completely objective and like a necessary part in a system of all the sciences.’ And also: ‘A fragment, like a work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and complete in itself like a hedgehog.’³² Schlegel thinks the fragment as an ideal inclusive totality that promises the all-inclusive work as a theoretical horizon or endpoint. Blanchot turns his attention to the journal in 1964 and, while noting the revolutionary action implied in this project, is critical of this aphoristic fragment for being closed on itself and for setting boundaries rather than undoing them.³³ The Blanchotian fragment is characterized by an excess which Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe underestimate in their mock dialogue of 1982, where they argue that this fragment remains dialectical. They quote a passage from *L’Ecriture du désastre* where Blanchot writes that the fragment, as fragments, tends to dissolve the totality which it both presupposes and sweeps aside in order to maintain itself [*se maintenir*] as the energy of disappearing [*énergie de disparaître*]. Noting that the Greek origin of ‘énergie’ can be translated as work, Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe argue that Blanchot’s fragment has the all-inclusive work as its horizon and is therefore no different from the Romantic aphorism.³⁴ Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe end the quotation here but the sentence continues in the original: ‘énergie répétitive, limite de l’infini mortel — ou œuvre de l’absence d’œuvre (pour le redire

³² ‘Athenaeum Fragments’, trans. by P. Firchow, in *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*, ed. by J. M. Bernstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 246–60 (pp. 248, 251).

³³ Blanchot, ‘L’Athenaeum’ [1964], in *L’Entretien infini*, pp. 515–27 (p. 527).

³⁴ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘Noli me frangere’, *Revue des sciences humaines*, 185 (1982), 83–92 (p. 87).

et le taire en le redisant).³⁵ Read further through this sentence and the relationship between fragment and totality becomes more complicated than simple opposition: ‘énergie répétitive’ suggests worklessness rather than work and the insertion of a quotation from that earlier essay on the Jena Romantics, ‘ou œuvre de l’absence de l’œuvre’,³⁶ and the subsequent response placed within parentheses silences and exceeds this aphorism. The ‘œuvre de l’absence de l’œuvre’ associated with Romanticism is not the worklessness at stake in the fragmentary, which is the effect of an uncontrollable repetition or dissemination. Blanchot ends this fragment by referring to a Romantic irony that is a means of further reinforcing the dialectic: the system pretends to be unsystematic only to have a better grip on itself, to include its own opposite in an authoritarian way. But the dialectic can go in either direction and there is another kind of irony that is reflexive in the sense that it is turned toward an extremity, so that writing and other modes of technology are unleashed in a disseminating and uncontrollable manner that escapes the system.

Forgetting machines

In fragmentary writing, the force of repetition takes over from the sovereign subject. The essay on the Jena Romantics appeared a year before Blanchot’s contribution to the debate surrounding the implications of paperback publishing. This had been sparked in 1964 by the art-historian Hubert Damisch who denounced the format, arguing that rather than offering cultural democratization it transformed the contestatory book into an everyday consumer commodity and neutralized its revolutionary potential. The inclusion in the original article of an epigraph from Heidegger’s ‘The Question Concerning Technology’ left Damisch’s

³⁵ Blanchot, *L’Écriture du désastre*, pp. 99–100.

³⁶ For the ‘original’ passage from which this is taken, see Blanchot, ‘L’Athenaeum’, p. 517.

position open to the accusation that he was simply taking up a traditional stance against writing and the dangers of technology.³⁷ In his response to Damisch's article Blanchot welcomed the new paperback format whilst recognizing that the potential for the wider diffusion of works and the cultural change that this implied was in fact not realized: those who bought paperbacks were often the relatively well-off middle classes, not all texts were available in paperback form, and the driving motivation for the publishing industry was profit.³⁸ Modern technology in this account is not going to solve any problems; it is the servant of capitalist ideology. Literature, in contrast, is contestation of established power, of what is and of the very fact of being, of language and forms of literary language, and of itself as power.³⁹ While cultural forces may attempt to pacify turbulent works by incorporating them into the whole, transforming them into mere entertaining morsels through the printing press and the television, a structure of exclusion always persists and it is the changeable outside ensured by this structure which we experience through literature.

The contrast between technology and literature that emerges in this essay is, however, not as unambiguous as it may first appear. Blanchot does not condemn the paperback or indeed the technology that has driven this so-called revolution, stressing that there is nothing to say against technology.⁴⁰ His argument is not that we should limit the power behind

³⁷ See Hubert Damisch, 'La Culture de poche' [1964], in *Ruptures/Cultures* (Paris: Minuit, 1976), pp. 57–73. Douglas Smith compares the positions of Blanchot and Damisch in 'The Burning Library: The Paperback Revolution and the End of the Book in 1960s France', *French Studies*, 72 (2018), 539–56.

³⁸ Blanchot, 'Les Grands Réducteurs', pp. 81–82.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

cultural assimilation but that we should push it to the extreme, to the point of explosion where the system cannot maintain the limits it has imposed. Works are so readily available in the age of the *Livre de poche* that it is as if time were abolished by mass reproduction.⁴¹ The printing press allows an interruption or fracture, outplaying the cultural and historical limits within which it functions. Literature is displaced through cultural appropriation; but ‘literature’, questioning not only the limits of this cultural unity but also itself, challenges this continuity. Quoting Trotsky in the footnote that concludes the essay Blanchot compares literature and art in the era of the *Livre de poche* to the Revolution that turns life into a sort of bivouac, rendering everything — but itself more than anything else — strange, transitory, and precarious.⁴²

A little over a year later in ‘Nietzsche et l’écriture fragmentaire’ [1966/7] Blanchot turns to the fragment as a means of responding to the outside indicated by this rupture. At stake here is another crucial difference between Blanchot and Heidegger: Nietzsche is not last metaphysician, the label applied by Heidegger, but writer of fragments that gesture toward an outside which resists expression.⁴³ The significance of typography to the elaboration of the fragmentary in this essay is striking as commonplace technology is again exploited for the purposes of writing. ‘Langage: l’affirmation même, celle qui ne s’affirme plus en raison ni en vue de l’Unité. Affirmation de la différence, mais toutefois jamais différente. Parole

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., p. 85 n. 1.

⁴³ Hill emphasizes what is distinctive about Blanchot’s reading of Nietzsche in *Maurice Blanchot and Fragmentary Writing*, pp. 31–37.

plurielle.’⁴⁴ Just as the telephone call in *La Folie du jour* establishes and annuls a distance within the doubled narrator and exposes ‘him’ not caught up within the exchange to an unwilling refusal, the colon equates language to an affirmation of (in)difference which it simultaneously destabilizes. This is not an isolated instance where Blanchot uses punctuation as a destabilizing strategy or ‘technique’: ‘ $\pm \pm$ Interpréter: l’infini: le monde. Le monde? Un texte? Le texte: le mouvement d’écrire dans sa neutralité’; ‘ $\pm \pm$ Différence: la non-identité du même, le mouvement de distance, ce qui porte en déportant, le devenir d’interruption.’⁴⁵ The colons suggest a clear and stable relationship between two or three terms; however, the relation is no sooner asserted than it is under erasure through the introduction of question marks, and elsewhere semi-colons, in a sort of typographical re-enactment of the movement of distance and the becoming of interruption described in that last line quoted. What better emblem for this formulation than the plus-minus sign ($\pm \pm$), a mathematical symbol that indicates a choice of two possible values, each of which is the suspension or deferral of the other, and precedes each of the twenty-eight fragments of ‘Nietzsche et l’écriture fragmentaire’? This symbol points to that original separation, allowing difference to speak (because what matters is the unstable answer or reversible movement between the two values) and an incalculable excess to escape this mathematical system. These interrupting signs do not translate the void but indicate a rupture; of course, this distance is never stable and is continually distanced from itself in a double movement of external reflection. These signs place this discourse in relation to the fragmentary which lies outside the totality and coherence of language, enabling each fragment to think the impossible. For Derrida,

⁴⁴ Blanchot, ‘Nietzsche et l’écriture fragmentaire’ [1966/7], in *L’Entretien infini*, pp. 227–55 (p. 234).

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 252, 254.

analysing the significance of punctuation for Blanchot in ‘Michel Foucault tel que je l’imagine’, such carefully selected typographical marks indicate the impossible, not fatal, experience of dying.⁴⁶ Any thought of dying is a deconstruction of the will in which the machine takes over.

The mechanical worklessness of fragmentary writing is further underscored by Blanchot in a fragment on Nietzsche’s Eternal Return which first appeared in 1970, a year after Klossowski’s *Nietzsche et le cercle vicieux* [1969]. Heidegger thinks Eternal Return as the sum of the will: by dint of the will, Nietzsche is able to overcome time and Eternal Return is the last ditch statement of metaphysics.⁴⁷ Blanchot, on the other hand, following Klossowski, sees a total loss of will in Eternal Return. Klossowski reads Eternal Return on two levels: the paradoxical revelation experienced by Nietzsche at Sils-Maria (a revelation that cannot be a revelation because it has always already happened) and the presentation of the doctrine of the vicious circle.⁴⁸ Eternal Return as revelation represents an apprehension of the self as what it really is (a fortuitous moment) through a process of passing through previous instances of the self. The past is irretrievable and so to will the past is to will necessity or to will what is beyond will. In this account, the self is nothing other than a discontinuous series of non-identical and fortuitous instances and Eternal Return is a forgetting of the current self and a remembering of the others each in turn until one returns to

⁴⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Politiques de l’amitié* (Paris: Galilée, 1994), pp. 334–35.

⁴⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, trans. by David Farrell Krell, 4 vols (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979–87).

⁴⁸ Pierre Klossowski, *Nietzsche et le cercle vicieux*, rev. edn (Paris: Mercure de France, 1969).

the inactive self that first underwent the revelation of Return.⁴⁹ Eternal Return is therefore a sort of deconstruction of the will, which brings us back to the machine. It is in this context that Blanchot writes in 1970: ‘♦ Admettons que les événements ne soient réels’ qu’au passé, machine fonctionnant de telle sorte que nous puissions nous remémorer, par une mémoire bien agencée, quoique avec un léger doute, tout ce que le futur pourrait nous promettre ou nous faire redouter.’ The future belongs as much to yesterday as to tomorrow when it is experienced as repetition of an irretrievable past. This is a messianic futurity void of any past or future Messiah which, rather than hastening the end, is the patient deferral of all ending. This messianic structure is eternally open to a future that is never limited by the horizons of meaning and allows for the passage toward the other.⁵⁰ At every point in Eternal Return the present is eclipsed; interrupted, a void is opened between past and future in which what matters, like those two values indicated by the plus-minus sign in ‘Nietzsche et l’écriture fragmentaire’, is the difference that always risks slipping into indifference. But the only proof we have of Eternal Return is that we cannot believe in it: what Klossowski calls the presentation of the doctrine of the vicious circle is always describing something that escapes description. The law of interruption interrupts itself; returning to the self that first underwent

⁴⁹ See Ian James, *Pierre Klossowski: The Persistence of a Name* (Oxford: Legenda, 2000), pp. 129–41.

⁵⁰ The text by Blanchot which most obviously sets in play this self-deconstructive movement of the messianic (the promise that can never realize itself and in affirming itself resists the possibility of its realization and in so doing simultaneously maintains and suspends itself) is *L’Écriture du désastre*, pp. 214–16. On the messianic in Blanchot, see Hill, *Maurice Blanchot and Fragmentary Writing*, pp. 368–91.

the revelation of Eternal Return, the will that wills this experience is undone and Eternal Return, dehumanized, becomes an uncontrollable mechanism.

Nature gone haywire

The description of Eternal Return as a forgetting machine in *Le Pas au-delà* reveals the otherwise unarticulated role of *techne* in the privation of subjectivity. Eternal Return, preventing all communication other than by interruption, is a sort of radicalized telephone call exposing the self to its own fortuity at all moments in time. Fragmentary writing similarly disobeys all rule of identity to outplay the human. A short contribution in 1989 to a special issue of *Cahiers Confrontation* edited by Jean-Luc Nancy and René Major entitled *Après le sujet qui vient?* provides no answer to the interrogative pronoun ‘Qui?’ which it takes as its title, but is an unwilling refusal to respond between the one who writes and a spectral figure hanging over his or her shoulder. Someone reading over the writer’s shoulder suggests that what comes after the subject is the writer returned to the time when he passed the baccalauréat; that may be correct, the writer responds, but this time he is bound to fail.⁵¹ What comes after the subject is a non-identical past; there can be no facsimile when the self is destitute and the repetitive energy of fragmentary writing takes over, undoing all presence. The *who?* does not belong to an ordinary temporality — always arriving its arrival is perpetually deferred — but to the temporality of a suspended afterwards. In this sense the *who?* is nonliving and the unending dialogue that forms the bulk of this ‘response’ gives way to a mechanistic, because uprooted, mode of writing: some of the closing lines of ‘Qui?’ are a

⁵¹ Maurice Blanchot, ‘Qui?’ [1989], in *La Condition critique: articles 1945–1998*, ed. by Christophe Bident (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), pp. 440–43 (p. 440).

quotation from Claude Morali who is in fact quoting from *Le Pas au-delà*.⁵² Focussing on a selection of fragments from *Le Pas au-delà* and *L'Écriture du désastre* this final section explores fragmentary writing as an inorganic proliferation radically open to the other.

Eternal Return as doctrine, a thought void of any content, places the entirety of individual experience under the law of repetition, non-identity, and discontinuity according to Klossowski.⁵³ The interrogative pronoun, having evacuated the subject of all identity, persists unanswered so that the only thing left to question is itself. The result is the echoed repetition of the *who?* which is forever differing from itself like that spectral figure reading over the shoulder of the one who writes. For Blanchot, interrogating the neuter is analogous to posing the question 'Qui?' The interrogation does not go beyond interrogation and the only possible response is the echoed repetition of the neuter, which is not a pure tautology because it disperses speech:

◆ *Le neutre, le neutre*: est-ce une répétition, ou quelque chose comme les ricochets qui, à l'infini, par le glissement de ce qui glisse, déclinent des séries multiples: le galet, la propulsion, la surface qui porte, la surface qui se dérobe, le temps, la droite qui se courbe et fait retour jusqu'à la chute qui résulte, sans leur appartenir, de tous ces moments et ainsi ne peut s'isoler, tout en ayant lieu à part, en sorte que le point

⁵² This is quoted later in this article. The fragment in question is found in Blanchot, *Le Pas au-delà*, p. 16. Claude Morali quotes this fragment in *Qui est moi aujourd'hui?* (Paris: Fayard, 1984).

⁵³ Klossowski, *Nietzsche et le cercle vicieux*, pp. 94–95.

singulier qui la marquerait, reste, dans sa singularité, hors de la réalité de l'ensemble:
irréel et irréalisé?⁵⁴

'*Le neutre, le neutre*', Blanchot writes in this extract, leaving the unspoken difference suspended over the clause that follows. This ricochet produces differing unforeseen effects with each impact. Like a skimmed stone travelling across the water, the subject becomes impoverished, weakened with each glance off the water's surface, and is revealed to be nothing other than a discontinuous series of non-identical and fortuitous instances. There are echoes here of the description of Eternal Return as forgetting machine, although some may find this fanciful: 'galet' may refer to a pebble but also to the tensioner or pulley within an engine that keeps the belt taut and the engine running smoothly; here the pulley is faulty and introduces play into the mechanism.⁵⁵ Derrida, in his analysis of the apocalyptic tone, remarks that 'tonos' first signified everything subject to stricture: the tight ligament, cord, the braided rope, cable, strap.⁵⁶ Changes in tone or a multiplicity of tones leads to a slackening or unravelling of the philosophical tone, a derailment that interrupts the unity of the destination, the self-identity of the addressee or sender. Fragmentary writing allows such a multiplicity of tones and proposes radical change; the neuter renders everything non-identical with itself, but

⁵⁴ Blanchot, *Le Pas au-delà*, pp. 149–50.

⁵⁵ Galet is also a homophone of 'galée', which refers to galley proofs used in printing. On the word as a space of dissemination in Blanchot, see Jacques Derrida, 'Pas', in *Parages* (Paris: Galilée, 1986), pp. 19–116.

⁵⁶ Derrida, *D'un ton apocalyptique*, pp. 25–27. See also Derrida on the loose laces of those shoes painted by Van Gogh, and discussed by Meyer Schapiro and Heidegger, in Jacques Derrida, *La Vérité en peinture* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978), pp. 291–436.

this cannot take place in the here and now — the neuter can never be the object of an interrogation — and once advanced like the skimmed stone this radical change collapses and everything remains the same.

The effects of this mechanism are seen in the strange spaces and figures of *Le Pas au-delà*, in which fragments emanate from a depopulated world where nonliving figures await a forever deferred future. There is almost nothing in this text that can be identified as natural or organic: those fragments that seem to narrate a fiction are set in a cityscape littered, indoors and out, with rubble. In one fragment a debate takes place across the table while on the floor tired figures lying down to rest are exposed to a persistent youthful murmuring coming from days and years to come and those already gone:

♦ [...] *Tout autour, il y avait des hommes apparemment endormis, couchés à même le sol, des couvertures jetées sur eux comme on jette de la terre en talus, et ces petits monticules innombrables, pensées de la ville émiettée, s'égalisaient jusqu'à devenir le plancher nu de la pièce.*⁵⁷

The stones scattered across the floor of this room signal a radical non-identity that is open to the other because it is difference itself; the doubled figure of 'Qui?' and the ricocheted movement of the skimming stone in the previous extract also indicate this difference. Neither dead nor alive but suspended in nonliving repetition, the difference that speaks from these stones is also the difference that renders the subject destitute. Blankets are thrown over these figures as if they were throwing earth on a rampart; these piles of rubble are a defence or resistance. Refusal, Blanchot had written in connection to De Gaulle's return to power in

⁵⁷ Blanchot, *Le Pas au-delà*, p. 153.

1958, is not accomplished by an individual but from, ‘un commencement très pauvre qui appartient d’abord à ceux qui ne peuvent pas parler’. It is in this sense that the stones are open to the other which could be human, animal, insect or thing.

Depicted in this fragment is the echo of a politically significant event, most likely the student occupations of May 1968 in which Blanchot was heavily involved.⁵⁸ The echo of May 1968 is also heard in the children’s song in that displaced quotation at the end of ‘Qui?’ (Blanchot quoting Morali quoting Blanchot): ‘*Comme si avait retenti, d’une manière étouffée, cet appel, un appel cependant joyeux, le cri d’enfants jouant dans le jardin: “qui est moi aujourd’hui?” — “qui tient lieu de moi?” Et la réponse joyeuse, infinie: lui, lui, lui.*’ Only children can give an account that is open to impossibility, Blanchot continues in ‘Qui?’, and only children can sing it joyously: ‘Soyons, fût-ce dans l’angoisse et la pesanteur de l’incertitude, de temps en temps, ces enfants.’⁵⁹ The first-person plural imperative commands or asserts the presence of these children which is then suspended by the third-person imperfect subjunctive that follows, introducing uncertainty and discontinuity and eclipsing this presence. The song of the children playing in the garden simultaneously rings out and is stifled; the stress is on their presence and identity as subjects but the response is inconclusive and the repeated impersonal pronoun indicates a ricochet, an unspoken difference, that has undone and will undo the subject. That the undoing of the subject has already begun is more apparent in the version quoted above from ‘Qui?’ in 1984 where an em dash is inserted which does not appear in *Le Pas au-delà* in 1973.

⁵⁸ On Blanchot’s involvement in May ’68, see Christophe Bident, *Maurice Blanchot: partenaire invisible* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1998), pp. 469–83.

⁵⁹ Blanchot, ‘Qui?’, p. 443. The first extract quoted, without the em dash, is an unacknowledged citation of a fragment in *Le Pas au-delà*, p. 16

The unwilling refusal to respond to the impossible question put to Blanchot by Jean-Luc Nancy and René Major in 1984 reveals a destitute subject evacuated of all identity and suspended in the temporality of nonliving repetition. The subject, interrupted, gives way to an uncontrollable mechanism: fragmentary writing. The fragment behaves like a cancerous cell, proliferating beyond its own borders and undermining the stability of (Blanchot's) original text. It is not as simple death at work that cancer would be a singular threat but as a sort of mortal malfunctioning:

♦ [...] dérèglement plus menaçant que le fait de mourir et rendant à celui-ci son trait de ne pas se laisser compter ni entrer en ligne de compte, de même que le suicide disparaît des statistiques où l'on prétend le dénombrer. [Si la cellule dite cancéreuse, se reproduisant indéfiniment, est éternelle, celui qui en meurt pense, et c'est l'ironie de sa mort: 'Je meurs de mon éternité.']⁶⁰

The final sentence of the fragment quoted here does not appear in the first edition of the text dated 18 September 1980; this sentence is a later addition that does not change the pagination of the text, which bears no acknowledgement that it is anything other than a first edition.⁶¹ Through a sort of wayward proliferation, an uncontrollable dissemination that escapes the

⁶⁰ Blanchot, *L'Écriture du désastre*, p. 137, Blanchot's emphasis.

⁶¹ Blanchot says this in a letter to Pierre Madaule dated 2 March 1981, noting that this was the only change he made to the text and expressing surprise that the first edition had sold out. See Maurice Blanchot and Pierre Madaule, *Correspondance: 1953–2002*, ed. by Pierre Madaule (Paris: Gallimard, 2012), p. 29. That this is the only change he made to the text makes it all the more significant.

system, the cancerous cell works outside the law of the programme and destroys all idea of a programme. The cancerous cell is perhaps a Foucauldian resistance to the biopolitical forces that regulate and manage our lives. Foucault writes in the first volume of *Histoire de la sexualité* [1976] that suicide was once a crime, because the right to death was the power possessed by the sovereign over his people, but now it is a unique and individual act of resistance against forms of administering life.⁶² The influence of Foucault is evident earlier in this fragment (a reference to disease and leprosy is perhaps a nod to *Histoire de la folie* and *Surveiller et punir*) but Blanchot goes further: cancer is mortal debauchery, not simply death at work. The significance of this difference is clarified in the cancerous proliferation of the fragment: the irony of this death is that it eludes the subject. Blanchot is suggesting that Foucault's account of suicidal resistance is reliant on the will of a subject; this cancerous proliferation is a different sort of incomprehensible and infinitely reflexive irony that exceeds and contests subjectivity.

A Blanchotian reflexivity marks the proliferation of the cancerous cell: turning outward it contests and is contested to the point that it is effaced. The fragment echoes this cancerous proliferation and the fragmentary has a complicated relationship with the organic which is one of excess rather than a simple opposition. In its excess the fragmentary is that *techné* which outplays the human; it shows that the end does not always imply a new beginning but a suspended moment where nothing is final — and there is something radically affirmative about this interruption which offers the chance to hear something other than dominion in technology.

⁶² Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, 3 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1976–84), I: *La Volonté de savoir*, 182.